



## Pueblos Silenciosos/ Silent Communities: Within the Grain, Against the Grain

Özge Karayalçın, ozgekarayalcinonay@gmail.com

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### Abstract

This assignment is an attempt to map in general sense the origins and development of the Chicano movement in The United States. The reason why a term like "Chicano/-a" was coined and what it means politically, socially, economically and deep inside is going to be discussed in depth. The term Chicano or Chicana (also spelled Xicano or Xicana) was coined to characterize Latinos as American born, but originally based in Mexico. Filmed in 1987, the movie "Born in East L.A." is a cultural representation of Xicanos, that's why this movie has become a great source for me to fill the term "Chicano/-a" to form the basis for my assignment and be able to be more open in terms of elucidating the new identity called "chicano" today.

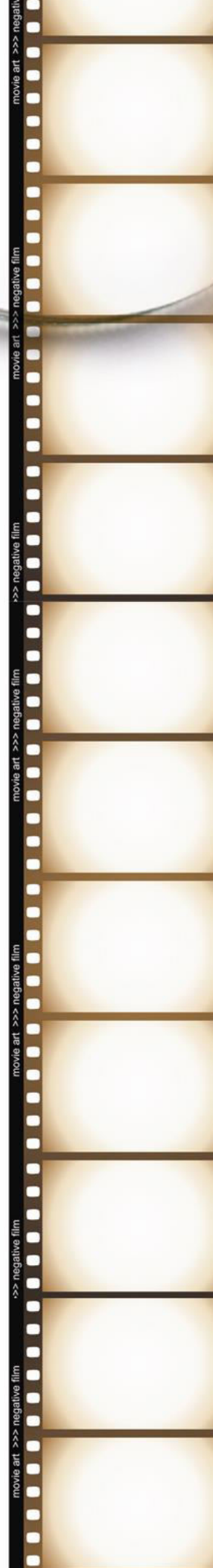
**Keywords:** Chicano Literature, minority studies, postcolonial era, border movies, Chicanos



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## Pueblos Silenciosos/ Silent Communities: Within the Grain, Against the Grain

Özge Karayalçın

The states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, California, and Nevada and parts of Oregon were the desired territories of the United States who acquired them through a violent act of war against a nation, Mexico. Without doubt, there were a great number of Latinos who, for generations, lived in these states in peace.

From 1846 to 1848, Mexican troops fought against American troops. Ultimately, it was a battle for land where Mexicans fought to retain their lands which they thought was their property. On the other hand, the United States wished to retain the disputed land and also, desired to obtain more of Mexico's northern lands. Foos (2002:5) states 'The Mexican War was a pivotal event in westward expansion and, as such, was critical in shaping the new exploitive social relations that would characterize "free labor" and American capitalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.''. The tension rose especially after rebuffing an American offer to purchase the California and New Mexico territories. The United States won the war and Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. After the battle, the United States were separated into two cultures, and two languages. Unlike the past immigrant groups, Latinos -later called as Chicanos-, didn't accept to live under the roof of mainstream U.S. culture composing, instead, their own cultural, political and linguistic enclaves.

Latinos partially rejected the Anglo-Protestant values because they believed that, especially the older generations, if they adopt the American values, they would be assimilated in American Dream in a perilous way. Thus, the Chicanos literally preferred to stay as Mexicans in the United States and carriers of the Mexican culture in there. However, this is erroneous, for the

Chicano culture isn't only unilateral but also versatile. As Ortega y Gasca states (1978:1) "It is an intermeshing of Anglo- American and Mexican elements". Therefore, the differences are profound between the two cultures due to the diverse respective cultural traditions. Currently, as a minority group in the U.S., Chicanos found themselves in the borderland (The U.S.-Mexican border) who was searching for their true identity and fighting with their unconscious to find themselves. An example for the struggle of the innerself can be found in the lines of **Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa** (September 26, 1942 – May 15, 2004).

**Una lucha de fronteras / A Struggle of Borders**

Because I am a *mestiza*,  
continually walk out of one culture  
and into another. because I am in all cultures at the same time,  
*alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,*  
*me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.*  
*Estoy norteadada por todos las voces que me hablan*  
*Simultáneamente.*

As Anzaldua (1987:63) writes, "One day the inner struggle will cease and a true integration [will] take place". Accordingly, the poem continues in Spanish, creating questions and asserting the Chicano's own identity struggles. As stated in the poem, the differences of their culture and language were reflected by their work of arts and this realization of difference is the crucial point to their hybrid identity. Anzaldua instinctively presents through her text that Chicanos fell into fragmented pieces with their two different cultures, languages, and policies around. As stated in the very first line of Anzaldua, the word "*mestiza*" is a kind of carrier of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another, in other words, it is a kind of dilemma of the mixed

breed. That's why, the new *mestiza* learns to develop a tolerance for contradictions, learns to be a Mexican from Anglo Saxon point of view.

As Fish, Jameson and Leal (1991:5) state "The political consequences of emphasizing the Spanish past were quite damaging. The historical fact that the Southwest was conquered as Mexican territory was completely ignored. It was as if Spain had become the United States without centuries of racial and cultural mixture." The new Chicano identity tried to learn developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. They, at first, learned to turn into Mexican from Indian identity; then from Anglo point of view to Mexican again. They learned how to combine the different cultures in time. They accepted that they have a plural personality and by the hand of art, namely the cinema, I expect to reflect this duality.

The chosen movie for the assignment is "Born in East L.A.", which was an immediate hit and was the most popular movie in the Southwest America for four weeks. The reason why it got an immediate success was it directly questioned the Chicano identity, especially in the time of legitimized discrimination in the 1980s. The challenge to the dominant culture's authority was reflected by means of alteration of consciousness, self-reflexivity, and the creation of Chicano film language. Likewise, the success of the movie is not only a matter of politics as of allegory, as Tafoya indicates (1993:124) "*Born in East L.A.* is essentially the story from the Book of Exodus of the flight of Jews from Egypt in to the Promised Lands<sup>1</sup>- rewritten to the Chicano context". The movie contains some theological elements. For instance, the similarity between Moses and *Born in East L.A.*'s main character, Rudy Robles is explicit in terms of both being the

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<sup>1</sup> All subsequent biblical quotes are taken from the Oxford Annotated Bible, RSV, (Oxford UP, 1997): 69-121.

liberators of their own enslaved people. In a way, as Moses did, Rudy shouldered the injustice and enslavement of his fellow countrymen in order to free them.

*Born in East L.A.* movie is about a mechanic called Rudy and he is a comfortable man whose only plan for the weekend is drinking with his friends and playing his guitar. His living a comfortable life stems from his indifference to his country men's enslavement around him. The theme of the movie is Mexican slavery but it only occurs when Rudy has to meet with his cousin Javier, whom he has never met before. As illegal immigrants from Mexico, the movie's general synopsis is about being a Chicano who lives in borderland such as Los Angeles, Texas, Albuquerque and Tucson.

When Rudy plans to see his no English-speaking-cousin at a toy factory in which a lot of Mexican-rooted people work, he finds himself illegally deported from L.A. which is his hometown. As Fregoso states (1990:6) "Moreover, the movie poses a crucial/ salient question, namely, what type of society deports its citizens merely on the basis of their appearance? To answer, or to be willing to accept the film's response, one must recognize the pervasiveness of institutional racism in this country".

The movie's theme turns from its signifying elements as of working-class, i.e. Mexican discourse to a new manifestation and the message of it, a patriotic and a racist, i.e. American discourse. Moreover, Rudy's real house is in L.A., whose family, as we see from the first scene, live in L.A., but he is forced to "go home". It is not so hard to comprehend that *Born in East L.A.* is a way of saying America for Americans; for white Anglo-Americans. From then on, Rudy was unconsciously dominated under white supremacy, what's more, from the white agent perspective, Rudy is perceived as "Mexican" because of his Chicano-styled dress and mannerism.

As a result, Rudy's planned visit to his cousin turned into a disaster as he was forcefully deported to Mexico with other workers who were working in the toy factory. After intruded into the bus, Rudy became shocked and he asked others "What is the next step?" the other workers said with smiling faces "Welcome to the back of the bus". So to say, the phrase *back of the bus* is Mexico. After that moment, Rudy became the general representation of Mexican enslaved people who were illegally forced to go to Mexico. As stated above, Rudy's life transformed into a fugitive from a free man. Therefore, he faced the oppression of his fellow men, many of them were fugitives in the U.S. Rudy was a man who lived like a typical American in terms of his living style and the language he talked, however, from the opening scenes, the audience see that Rudy's mother is bilingual, so she both speaks Spanish and English. That's one of the reasons why Rudy could not reject his Mexican side. However, Cheech Marin- the director of the movie- did some deconstructions especially on the stereotypes. To illustrate, Rudy's house is not a typical Chicano house in a Chicano neighborhood where the houses weren't reflected generally with unkempt gardens, graffiti-ridden walls etc. In contrast, Rudy's house is a neatly kept house with a nice well-kept garden with a pink car in the front. Another flashy stereotype is the white French woman who came to Rudy's mechanic place to have her car repaired. The woman appeared -like a message to the audience- both in the beginning and at the end of the movie.

Clearly enough, many immigrants who come to U.S. wish to be with a white American woman to be accepted to the American Dream so that they can live the American Dream deep inside. If they cannot, they think that they will be assimilated and be excluded. That's the very reason why Rudy on end chased the French woman.

In addition to the stereotypes and metaphor, the movie indirectly gives lots of realist aspects to the audience according to the time the movie was filmed when the discrimination and

deportation were at its maximum level. Although the central conflict looks like Rudy as an illegal immigrant trying to get to the U.S., the movie is about the Chicano conflict, Mexican-origin or the child of Mexican heritage born in the United States.

Casted away, Rudy was never believed to be an American citizen and that made him shocked all the time when he was in Mexican side. Hence he forgot his identity card and money on the cupboard, he lost all his identification with U.S. and that situation had the worst of the events which cut the connection of Rudy with his American side.

Soon after Rudy's deportation, and his acceptance of his new identity, he was assigned to teach a group of non-Mexicans how to speak English and also the American manner codes by role playing. All the jobs Rudy were assigned are for crossing the line. He wanted to get home but he was denied because of his look. He encountered lots of Mexicans and others who had no job because they didn't get any proper education.

Finally, Rudy earned enough money to purchase his return ticket, but he gave up from his decision when he encountered with a couple who desired to go to L.A. just like Rudy. However, they got only one person's fare on the contraband journey. The emotional goodbye of the couple made Rudy so sad and he sacrificed his fare and gave his own space on the truck to the woman.

Determined to return home, in the movie's final sequence, Rudy along with a great number of his fellow men- undocumented brown people- run down from the mountaintop through two border police officer. This border-storming of thousands of people is one of the funniest scenes of the movie, at the same time, it is one of the most sarcastic and meaningful scenes, too. This is the very moment of these people who set their future and announce their chicano/-a identity, in a way, they cross the lines of American dream and claim what is rightfully theirs. In the final

analysis, the emphasis is not on becoming someone or a good citizen but it is about the relationship between race and citizenship. In between deportation and return, Rudy realized that American society sees him not more than a Mexican citizen, he comes to a realization that he was living in the American Dream.

Why was becoming a citizen in the very place you were born that difficult? As Vento (1997:183) states ‘‘Specifically the Anglo American’s prejudice stemmed from notions of class and color. Generally, Mexicans were looked at as cross-breeds, off color race that could never be equal to whites; a Mexican no matter how educated, could not be as good as a white man because ‘‘God did not intend him to be....He would have made him white if He had’’. Thus being a Mexican who lives in the U.S. means living in a puzzle, in a way, you are ready to be assimilated by Anglo-Saxon America rather than defending your own culture. However; being a Chicano citizen is something different. If you are born in the U.S but your root belongs to Mexico, you are now a Xicano, so you should be ready to embrace both cultures’ life styles, languages, people and, without any hesitation, you must melt them into your own innerself to have peaceful life rather than living in a chaos without solving which super-ego you have to adopt in yourself.

Chicano body is hybrid, mestizo, and their homeland is both Mexico and U.S., in a way, international. Their language is, like their body, mestizo and the borderlands are their homes. So their body, language, even their life styles simultaneously reflect multiple forces and assert its hybridity.

As a conclusion, I want to give a nice and a short expression of what kind of identity a Chicano citizen has. However; my ideas were literally enunciated by Aldama who says ‘‘you are like two people: One is like a kid, doesn’t know how to dance, doesn’t know how to make love.



The one I care about. The other one I hate, the one who knows, who has this rap down, who kills people”.

Chicanos only want to have an identity, the desire is getting an identity in the symbolic order, nothing more.

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